by Craig Kelly

Flushing Money Down the Drain

$150...$425...$1,590... imagine the shock when opening a water bill to find that it has doubled, tripled, or even increased to 15 times your average monthly statement. Did the sprinklers run more often? Did family members or guests take longer showers? Is there a water leak under the foundation? Those are possible culprits for a higher than expected water bill, but more than likely the issue is as simple as a leaky toilet, one of the more costly household leaks.

Toilets account for 25 - 40% of indoor water consumption in the home and are especially leak prone. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 20% of all toilets leak, contributing to the more than one trillion gallons of water wasted each year through household leaks — equivalent to the annual water use of Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami combined. Leaky toilets are common and potentially the largest source of water loss within your home.

Toilet leaks range from small to large, a constant flow to a random leak, from being audible or silent. Depending on the water pressure, and type of problem, a leaking toilet can waste anywhere from several gallons per day to more than one thousand gallons per day, adding up to over 25,000 gallons a month. "The average toilet leak costs customers $200-$400 a month," says Dixie Dewey, utility billing supervisor for the City of Wylie. "We recently had a customer whose bill totaled more than $1,500…it can add up quickly."

Dewey says that in most cases toilet leaks are easy to identify, "If the handle has to be jiggled to make a toilet stop running; if you hear draining, dripping or flowing water sounds coming from a toilet that is not in use; or if the toilet periodically fills for a few seconds without touching the handle…you can be fairly certain that you have a leak." Dewey also warned of silent, undetectable leaks that do not show any symptoms but potentially waste thousands of gallons over a period of time. The bottom line is that water should not move from the tank to the bowl without being flushed. Dewey advises using a leak detection kit or food coloring to reveal leaks. Remove the tank cover, place the dye, and watch for colored water entering the bowl. Be patient, slow leaks may not be visible for 10 – 20 minutes.

The most common reason a toilet leaks is an old or worn out flapper, the valve that opens as the handle is engaged to allow water to move from the tank to the bowl. These inexpensive rubber parts can build up minerals or decay over time compromising the seal. Most often this is a do-it-yourself job, consult your local hardware store or home improvement retailer. If in doubt, call on the expertise of a professional plumber. With a little effort, you can save many gallons of water and thereby reduce your water bill each month.

Old, inefficient toilets are also responsible for up to 40 gallons a day of wasted water. Toilets manufactured before 1993, use 3.5 to 6 gallons per flush, while newer EPA endorsed WaterSense toilets use 1.28 gallons per flush. By replacing old, inefficient toilets the average family can reduce water used for toilets by 20 to 60 percent—nearly 13,000 gallons of water savings annually! Design advances have enabled WaterSense-labeled toilets to save water with no trade-off in performance. In fact, many outperform standard toilets in consumer testing, the EPA says.

The cost of drips...

1 Home with 1 leak dripping 20 per minute = 694 gallons per year
1 Home with 1 leak dripping 30 per minute = 1041 gallons per year
1 Home with 1 leak dripping 60 per minute = 2082 gallons per year
1 Home with leaking toilet can leak 25,000 gallons per month or more

The cost of leaky toilets goes beyond a high water bill. Remember, water is a precious, limited resource that is necessary to sustain all living things. Wylie, Sachse and Murphy, along with more than 1.6 million other customers in North Texas, receive their water from the North Texas Municipal Water District (NTMWD), located in Wylie. We must all do our part through daily conservation to ensure that this finite, valuable resource is not wasted. •